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RESOLUTION EXTENDING  
**LIFE OF PARLIAMENT**  
AND  
**SPEECH**  
OF THE  
**RT. HON. SIR WILFRID LAURIER**  
P.C., G.C.M.G., M.P.  
IN THE  
HOUSE OF COMMONS FEBRUARY 28, 1902  
(From the Official Minutes)

FROM ADDRESS TO THE ARMY

Moved by the RT. HONOURABLE SIR ROBERT BORDEN, P.C., G.C.M.G., M.P.

I, Notwithstanding anything in the British North America Act, 1867, or in any Act amending the same, or in any Order in Council, or in any terms or conditions of union, made or approved under the said Act, or under any Act of the Canadian Parliament, the term of the Twelfth Parliament of Canada is hereby extended until the seventh day of October, 1902.

**Our Pillar of Fire.**

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The RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR WILFRID LAURIER, (Quebec East): Mr. Speaker, when the Fathers of Confederation sought the sanction of the Imperial Parliament for the plan which they had devised for the union of the British provinces of this continent, they declared, in the very preamble of the Act, that the new Dominion should be endowed with a constitution similar in principle to the constitution of the United Kingdom. It is well to mark the words, Sir, because the intention of those men, who had the moulding of Canada's destinies in their hand, was that the British constitution should be the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day which should guide the young country to union and to nationhood. In the mass of rules and maxims, statutes and precedents which make up the British constitution, there was one feature which particularly seemed to have attracted their attention, and that was that the maxim that the life of the elected branch of Parliament should not exceed limits rigidly fixed by law, and, as a corollary, that there should be at least one session of Parliament every year. These provisions of the British constitution had been evolved in the long struggle of the

British people for constitutional government, and they were intended to put a check upon the power of the King and of Parliament. They were intended to subject the King to the control of Parliament and to subject Parliament to the final arbitrament of the people. The great and eminent men, wise and prudent also, who were then moulding the destinies of our country, recognised the importance of these dispositions by making them fundamental features permanent enactments of our constitution, and went so far as to place them beyond the power of this Parliament to repeal, to alter, or to ignore them. By Section 50 of the Constitution they provided that:

Every House of Commons shall continue for five years from the day of the return of the writs for choosing the House (subject to be sooner dissolved by the Governor-General), and no longer.

By Section 20 they provided also as follows:

There shall be a session of the Parliament of Canada once at least in every year, so that twelve months shall not intervene between the last sitting of the Parliament in one session and its first sitting in the next session.

These two provisions are part of our constitutional law, and it is not in the power of this Parliament to ignore, to repeal, or to amend them.

### **Government Deserves Censure.**

The last elections took place in September, 1911; the writs were returned in the following October; therefore this Parliament must cease in the month of October next. The only authority by which these provisions may be altered is vested, not in this Parliament, but in the Imperial Parliament. Such is the law to-day.

Yet, in the face of this imperative disposition, there have been evidences as numerous almost as the days of the year that on the part of the Canadian people there is growing disinclination to have an election during the War. The reason for that view seems to be this: in all things human, even the most excellent, the infirmity of our nature is never completely absent. We prize our system of parliamentary government. We believe that the institutions which we obtained from Great Britain, if not absolutely perfect, are undoubtedly the best and wisest that ever were devised for the government of men; yet they betray the imperfection of our nature. Our own experience has proved that in every election there is some displacement of the public economy of the community; there is an unsettled state of business, more or less pronounced; there is violence to a greater or less degree in the clash of opinions and the clash of parties. And at a time when the energies of the nation should be bent towards one end, and one end only, the very thought that there might be an election, with all its concomitant strife and division, was alarming to a large section of the community. This feeling on the part

of the public was aggravated, if not entirely caused, by the uncertainty that existed as to the intentions of the Government—an uncertainty for which I think they deserve some censure, because it was in their power to dispel it at once by a simple word frankly spoken. I say "uncertainty;" I should say rather "certainty," because for many months it seemed that the intention of the Government was to dissolve Parliament and to have an immediate election. I can not otherwise interpret the action of members of the Government.

### Those Thunder Tones.

The reasons which the right hon. the Prime Minister now gives as to why there should not be an election were just as applicable in the month of April last as they are to-day; and everybody remembers that in the month of April last my hon. friend the Minister of Public Works (Mr. Rogers) spoke very emphatically on this subject. He said this:

Is it, then, any wonder that the cry comes, from every individual that one meets and that understands the conditions, in tones louder than thunder, demanding that this Parliament be dissolved, that the rights and liberties of the people of this Dominion be granted to them under our form of democracy, and that that form of democracy be restored to them?

This language, coming from such an eminent member of the Cabinet as my hon. friend the Minister of Public Works—who, I believe, is credited with having a large share in the framing of the policy of the Government—such language, used in the presence of his colleagues, must have meant, if it meant anything, that the minister had the authority of the Cabinet for so speaking. Otherwise, my right hon. friend the Prime Minister would have taken his colleague in hand and taught him his responsibility.

But that is not all. Some weeks afterwards the hon. Minister of Public Works went to the city of Montreal, where he is reported to have spoken, after this fashion:

Mr. Rogers said, in view of the action of the irresponsible majority in the Senate, the Government had decided to appeal to the people last September, but its plans were changed owing to the outbreak of war. If the Opposition had played a loyal part, and had assisted the Government in the emergency, there would have been no talk about an election at the present time.

In my judgment, these words meant only one thing: that the Government had resolved to try the fortune of a general election. But, whatever may have been the object of this attitude on the part of the Government, the response was not what had been anticipated. On the part of a large section of the community there was a sense of irritation that, at such a time, the Government should think of launching the country into the turmoil unavoidable from a premature appeal to the people. Therefore hon. gentlemen opposite changed their minds, and it was with no surprise that we heard from the speech of His Royal Highness the following declaration:

The life of the present Parliament expires in the autumn of this year, and under existing legislation, a dissolution and election would be necessary in the early future. My advisers, however, are of the opinion that the wishes of the Canadian people and the present requirements of the War would be best met by avoiding the distraction and confusion consequent upon a general election at so critical a time.

That purpose can only be effected through the medium of legislation by the Parliament of the United Kingdom. A resolution authorizing and requesting the enactment of such legislation as will extend the life of this Parliament for the period of one year will be presented to you.

### **Compelled to Retreat by Public Opinion.**

In view of the expressions of public opinion to which my right hon. friend referred during the course of his remarks which he made this afternoon, it is possible that the proposal for an extension of the term of Parliament not for the period of the War, but simply for a period of twelve months, will occasion some disappointment. But, in my judgment, and, I believe, in the judgment of every one who values British institutions, a proposal for the extension of the term of Parliament for the duration of the War would be absolutely unacceptable, and if such a proposition as that should be brought before Parliament, I would deem it my duty to oppose it to the last. If this course were taken, we should substitute for an evil which we wish to avoid an evil still more to be dreaded. Whatever we may do, we cannot deprive the people of the supreme command which they must have over their legislatures, the members of which they elect. We cannot deprive them of periodical elections. The period may be extended, or restricted, but, we cannot have an indefinite proposition such as would be involved in a general proposal to have the term of Parliament extended during the whole duration of the War. We do not know how long the War may last. We all hope that it will soon be over; certainly it will not be over so soon as we at first expected. But we have reason to believe that the words of Lord Kitchener, true and good soldier as he is, and knowing his business as well as any man, will come true and that the War will be over within three years, and that would be towards the end of 1917.

### **Differences of Opinions.**

The proposal of the Government to which they ask our sanction in the resolution is that the term of Parliament should be extended for one year from the end of the present Parliament. When the speech from the Throne was delivered I deemed it my duty, though my own views were pretty well formed on the subject, to consult those who do me the honour of giving me their confidence in this House. At the conference which we had on this subject there was, as of course there must be in every party, differences of opinion. My right hon. friend quoted in his speech the views held by the Liberal press. One would assume

from this that the views held by the Conservative press were the same, since he did not think it advisable to quote them to the House, but everybody knows that the Conservative press was not unanimous upon the subject, and that there were organs of Conservative opinion which were adverse to any extension. The same division of opinion prevailed elsewhere. But whatever may have been the division of opinion amongst us, there was a general consensus of opinion. I think I may say so without betraying any secret—that the matter should be left to our own judgment. This was placing upon me a heavy responsibility, a responsibility which it is not my intention to shirk or to shirk to avoid. I will endeavour to discharge it according to the dictates of my conscience and certainly also with due regard for the rights of the people and I understand their rights.

In the position which I occupy in this House, enjoying as I do the confidence of a large section of the Canadian Parliament, I am a servant of the state, a servant of the people; and in the state and the people I owe duties—duties which, while differing from those appertaining to the members of the House who occupy the treasury benches, are nevertheless equally binding upon me and not inferior in responsibility. When war broke out I had a clear vision of the path I should follow, and from that path I have never deviated, though very often I encountered the snarl of foes, and sometimes the doubts of friends. Standing before me were facts which illuminated my course and pointed the way.

### Britain's High Motive.

There was first of all the fact that England did not engage in this War from any motive of ambition or from any desire for aggrandisement. England went into this War from a sense of the duty which she owed not so much to herself, as to Europe and to mankind at large. There is nothing so sure in history, nothing so much beyond controversy—that Sir Edward Grey, a statesman whose judgment, moderation, and lofty thought already since the War began, have been tried a hundred times, a hundred times found true, did everything it was possible for a man to do to preserve peace. He appealed again and again to the German Emperor through our ambassador and chancellor with the view of inducing him to use his great authority in Europe to have peace maintained. He appealed to him in the name of all that was sacred on earth, but he found the German mind poisoned by the lust of power, by the hope of huge indemnities after the victory, and by the allurements of booty and glory; if, indeed, there be any glory in the modern methods of German warfare. He appealed in vain. Sir, there was a time, not so long ago, when Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, came back from Berlin bringing a treaty which he presented to England, and which England accepted as "peace with honour." When



the German chancellor, speaking in the name of his nation, and of his Emperor, contemptuously stated that treaties were nothing but scraps of paper, to be respected so long as they suited the German purpose, but to be discarded as soon as they came in the way of German ambition, what was there for England to do? Nothing but to return to Berlin with victory and honour.

### Canada's Clear Duty.

And what was Canada to do? Sir, I need not comment upon that. Many times upon the floor of this House I have expressed my views. There was no obligation, no compulsion. Canada was free, absolutely free: free to go in, and free to stay out. But what use are we to make of our liberty? We knew that England was engaged in mortal combat with an enemy strong in preparation—even more prepared than we had supposed hitherto—an enemy animated by the black ambition of universal domination. Under such circumstances there was nothing for Canada to do but to do what she did; to place at the disposal of England all her resources in men and money. Men there are to-day who sneer at the thought of Canada exhausting her resources to defend the Empire. Sir, who talks of Empire to-day? There are other things greater even than the Empire, great as it is. Civilization is greater than the Empire, and civilization is the issue. Who can doubt, who can deny, in the face of the declarations and pretensions set up by German writers in their books, in face of the vain and childish declarations of their most renowned professors, of the brutally frank avowals of their military leaders; who can doubt but that if Germany were to win it would be the end of all we hold sacred. Who can doubt that it would be the end of that individual liberty, that personal dignity, that independence of thought and action which citizens of all British countries value more than life itself. For my part, I re-echo the words lately spoken by that workman of the docks of Liverpool, who discussing compulsion in England put an end to all doubts, by exclaiming: "If Germany should win, nothing on God's earth would matter." I speak my whole soul and heart when I say that if Germany were to win I would be thankful that Providence should close my eyes before I saw the sun rising on such a day.

But, Sir, there is more. Need I repeat that I am a Canadian of French origin. It has always seemed to me that those in whose veins courses the blood of France, as it courses in my veins, should have been even more eager than their fellow-citizens of English origin to stand behind England in this contest. Why should I say so? We of French origin have always had pride in our race. We have always affirmed it, not obstreperously, but with dignity, and certainly there never was a time when we had greater cause to be proud of the land of our ancestors than in

these days when France, tried in the crucible of adversity, is perhaps greater than she ever was in the days of her greatest triumphs. She astonishes the world with her courage and heroism, and she shows to the world not only all the virtues that we have her to be possessed of, but virtues that we thought she lacked. These are some of the reasons which at all events influence me. It was a day of joy for us of French origin when England and France, who have done so much to bring civilization to the high plane it has reached, at last put an end to their quarrels, buried and buried forever, their old enmities, and proclaimed to the world their never-ending friendship. That day the last pang of bitterness passed away, and there arose new hopes and new aspirations to nobler and broader views.

### Days of Anxiety.

But there came days of anxiety. As was well said the other day in a most admirable speech by my hon. friend from Kamouraska (Mr. Lapointe) on the 28th day of July, 1914, when Germany declared war on France, there seemed to be hesitation on the part of England, and doubt as to whether or not the entente cordiale was anything but a broken reed. Anxiety there was as to what seemed to be hesitation. But there was no hesitation on the part of England. It must be remembered that Great Britain is a democratic country, and that in all democracies public opinion is the last supreme arbiter. There has been for the last sixty years in England a party of peace—a party of peace at any price—which was represented in the Cabinet, and before the Cabinet could declare war they had a ministerial crisis. Two important members of the Government, Lord Morley and John Burns, declined to serve and they resigned rather than participate in the policy adopted by the British Government. But, as was stated by my hon. friend from Kamouraska, the moment England declared war upon Germany, anxiety was replaced by enthusiasm, and from that day every Canadian of French origin, worthy of his origin, has stood behind England in the War.

But that is not all. When our troops crossed the seas what was their mission, what was their object, where were they to go? Their mission and their object was to go to France, to fight for France, nay, if need be, to die for France and.—I do not know whether I should say it in joy or sorrow—thousands of them, and more of British origin than of French origin, have given to France the last measure of their devotion, and have died for her.

Yet, that is not all. It is a fact well established by the testimony of history that there is no greater bond of union between men than danger met and supported in common. Men there are to-day in France, men of French origin, and of English origin, all united in a common allegiance, standing shoulder to shoulder

struggling to maintain the integrity of France and to preserve her from dismemberment and humiliation. I say without hesitation what I believe to be the true sentiment of all human hearts, that when these men divided as they are by race, come back to Canada, when the War is over, they will be more united than when they left and Canada will have the manifold blessing of that union.

### **Will Not Condone Dishonesty**

These were the sentiments which animated me. This was the vision which I had of what was to come, when, at the special session of the Parliament of 1914, I took my seat. Then I declared what should be the policy which I and the friends who give me their confidence would follow in this emergency. I expressed my views in words which have been very often quoted; they were even cited to-day by my right hon. friend the Prime Minister. I need offer no excuse if I should quote them again in view of what I shall have to say afterwards. On that occasion I stated the policy which we intended to follow in these words:

This session has been called for the purpose of giving the authority of Parliament and the sanction of law to such measures as have already been taken by the Government, and any further measures that may be needed, to insure the defence of Canada and to give what aid may be in our power to the Mother Country in the stupendous struggle which now confronts her. Speaking for those who sit around me, speaking for the wide constituencies which we represent in this House, I hasten to say that to all these measures we are prepared to give immediate assent. If in what has been done or in what remains to be done there may be anything which in our judgment should not be done or should be differently done, we raise no question, we take no exception, we offer no criticism, and we shall offer no criticism so long as there is danger at the front.

These opinions which I then expressed have sometimes received a very singular interpretation. One interpretation of them which I have heard on the floor of this House this very session, would simply amount to making us mechanical automatons, mere clerks to register the decrees of the Government. I need not say that to such an interpretation we of the Opposition do not intend to pay any attention. We are here, the representatives of the people, we see very clearly the duties which we have to perform, and we are still an Opposition. My words were very plain, and I can repeat what I said then, exemplified by what has happened since, and by what we shall do again. All measures which have for their object the successful prosecution of the War we are prepared now, as in the past, to support; all measures, all actions, which in our judgment may be detrimental to the successful prosecution of the War, it will be our duty to oppose. As to all such things as have no improper character, as to all such things as might be differently done, though not done wrongfully, we shall raise no question. But, Sir, to all wrongs, to all frauds, we shall offer determined opposition—these



can not be condoned, they must be exposed, and, when exposed, they must be treated accordingly. These are the views we have held in the past, and which we now hold, and I appeal to the testimony of both friend and foe whether we have not remained true to these views to the present day. We have objected to no measure of the Government except their fiscal policy, and we objected to the fiscal policy introduced by the Minister of Finance last year, because in our judgment it would impair our trade relations with England, injure the trade of England, and to that extent injure the successful conduct of the War.

### **The Ark of the Covenant.**

I come to the measure which is before us, and which proposes to extend the term of this Parliament for twelve months. It must be remembered that this is a graver question for us in Canada than was the parliamentary extension measure for England. The extension that is now sought, as I must again remind the House, is not in our own power. We are seeking an amendment to the Constitution, which was provided by the Fathers of Confederation, and as to that we must be very careful. The Constitution is the Ark of the Covenant, enclosing the tables of the law, and no one can touch it except at his peril. For my part, in the words which were quoted by my right hon. friend a moment ago—and he might have quoted them again and again, for I have always spoken the same way on that subject—I would deprecate an election during the War. Still, were the War to be protracted unduly beyond what was contemplated, no one would suppose that the right of the Canadian people over this Parliament would be in abeyance for all that time. We have this to consider. It is a different thing to force an election when it can be avoided, and to face an election when the law compels it. Moreover, do not let us forget that there is dignity and grandeur in a people carrying on in time of stress their laws and their constitution just as they would in time of peace. In olden times, during war, even Rome suspended its constitution, but to the credit of England be it said that in no circumstances has she ever actually suspended her constitution. My right hon. friend has cited the example of Great Britain twice in her history extending the term of Parliament, but that is not a stretching of the British Constitution; it is quite within the powers of the British Parliament. During the Napoleonic Wars, and the French Revolution, which lasted with scarcely an interruption from 1793 to 1815, England went on as usual. Again, throughout the whole American Civil War, our sister republic, the daughter of Great Britain, maintained her laws and institutions just as in peace. But, great as were those wars, terrible as they were, they were as nothing compared with the present war. The present War is an exception to all things, and it is in that spirit of exception that I, for my part, am disposed to judge the

resolution which has been proposed by my right hon. friend. It is in that spirit that I am disposed to offer no opposition to it.

#### **No Election until 1917.**

I may say to my right hon. friend that among the reasons which he has given, there is one which does not particularly impress me, and that is, that before the term of Parliament which it is now proposed to extend is over, there may be some two hundred thousand or three hundred thousand of our soldiers still in Europe. These men would not be deprived of their votes in the event of an election, because the laws was passed last session provides for their being allowed to vote. There are other considerations, however, of greater moment, and which strongly appeal to me. I would observe, first of all, that it is not proposed here to alter the principle of the constitution. It is not proposed to override the control which the people have over Parliament. It is simply proposed to suspend for the time being the operation of the constitution. If it were proposed to make away altogether with that principle which is embodied in the constitution, certainly I would oppose such an attempt with all my might. But no such thing is proposed. This measure simply proposes that the constitution shall be suspended for twelve months, at the expiration of which time it will resume its full force.

There is another consideration. If we pass this resolution I take it as a pledge from the Government that we shall be delivered from the threat which was held over our heads last year, of an instantaneous and premature dissolution at any time the Government thought fit. If the Government asks us to extend the life of Parliament, I take it that there will be no election until the fall of 1917. We shall then know exactly where we are, and shall not be subject to all the uncertainties which have been hanging over us for the last twelve months.

#### **Election Threatened on Wrong Issue.**

Important, however, as these considerations are, they are not the one consideration which more than all appeals to me, and which has practically influenced my judgment. No one can have escaped the significance of the words of the Prime Minister when he said a moment ago that if the resolution was not adopted unanimously, he would think it his duty to withdraw it. I can conceive that. If this resolution was not adopted unanimously, even though carried by a majority of this House, and even if my right hon. friend himself were to carry it to the foot of the Throne, I have no doubt whatever that in the face of such a minority as would be arrayed against it, the British Parliament would never grant the power sought. The British Parliament, I am sure, will never, under any circumstances, alter the constitution of this country, except upon a unanimous resolution of the two branches of the Canadian Parliament. To say that

is paying no compliment to the British Parliament; it is only the spirit of the constitution; it is only the spirit which has always been displayed by Great Britain. To say that the British Parliament would oppose this measure unless presented to it with full unanimous support as I have mentioned is simply rendering bare justice to the Imperial Parliament, to the King, to the Lords, and to the Commons of Great Britain. But, Sir, if this Parliament not unanimously but by a majority pass this resolution and if in England they refuse then to pass it, or if the resolution is withdrawn from Parliament in the face of opposition from this side of the House, what would be the consequence? The consequence would be that we should at once have an election—an election during the War; and that election would take place not upon the broad questions of the War, not upon the great ideas which have been suggested by the War, not upon the conduct of the War by the Government, not upon the problems which are facing us on account of the War, but upon the refusal of the Opposition in the Canadian Parliament to grant an extension of the term of Parliament. That would be a miserable incident to go to the country upon, and I say, therefore, that instead of having the country divided upon such an incident, better by far—not only for the greater reasons, but even for the narrowest reasons of all—that we should preserve the unanimity which we have had in this House up to the present time.

#### **Will Not Oppose Resolution.**

After all, what is it that is being sought of us. It is sought of us, not to do away with the control of the Canadian people over this Parliament, but simply to suspend for a short twelve months the verdict of the Canadian people upon the Administration, upon its policy, and upon the general questions arising out of the War. For all these reasons, Sir, in view of the responsibility which has been placed upon my shoulders by my hon. friends, in view of the rights of the people, and in view of what I think best for the country, after giving this question the best judgment that I could, I am not prepared to oppose the resolution, but will allow it to pass unanimously in this House. I am well aware that the question is an important one; but, important as it is, it pales before the great problems which are still before us; it pales before the magnitude of the duties which the Allies have still to discharge.

Let us for a moment consider the progress of the War. The campaign of 1914 went in the favour of the Allies. The battle of the River Marne shattered the plans which had been long prepared and premeditated by the German General Staff for an easy and a rapid victory, and the end of the year 1914 found the Kaiser and his staff piling up corpses by the hundreds of thousands in the marshes and swamps of Flanders, in a vain effort to reach Calais. On the eastern front the Russians had gone from victory

to victory; they had taken possession of Galicia; they had reached the summit of the Carpathian mountains, and they were ready to invade Hungary. Such was the condition of affairs at the end of 1914. The campaign of 1915 was not as favourable to the Allies on the Western front: notwithstanding most brilliant victories won by them, notwithstanding glorious feats of arms in which our Canadian troops won undying fame, the two armies remained practically in the same position without marked advantage either on one side or the other. On the Eastern front the Russians fought at great odds. They were forced to abandon Galicia; they lost Poland; they suffered even an invasion of Russian territory; but at the end of the year they had checkmated the German forces and were prepared to take the offensive, and they have taken that offensive now. We are now at the beginning of the third campaign, and at this stage we may well appropriate to ourselves the invocation of the American poet:

Our fathers' God! from out whose hand  
The centuries fall like grains of sand,  
We meet to-day, united, free,  
Loyal to our land and Thee,  
To thank Thee for the era done  
And trust Thee for the opening one.

In the words of the poet, we meet to-day, united, free. These words were inspired by a very different occasion: they were written on the occasion of the Philadelphia Exhibition of 1876 to perpetuate the first century of the republic. An era was done: a new era was opening. The poet was not alone in his conception, and his hopes and his trust; the most enlightened opinions of the most enlightened countries, England, France and the United States, were full of faith that this era would be one of peace, and that it would see an approach, a permanent approach to that brotherhood of man, long sought, long hoped for and long prayed for, but never attained. These nations, the most enlightened on earth, were so absorbed by this idea and had such an abhorrence of war, that they would not even prepare against it, being full of confidence that the demons of war would never again be let loose on the world. But there was one power upon whom all appeals fell in vain, a power unreasoning in its mad ambition for conquest and domination. And the day came when it opened the gates and let loose its long prepared legions, and all the infernal furies rushed out in their wake. The issue is still pending and, so long as it is pending, so long as Belgium has not been restored to her independence, so long as France has not recovered her lost territory, so long as the enemy has not been thrown back beyond the Rhine, within its own borders, for my part, and I speak again as I have spoken always—my supreme thought will be to give all the assistance in our power to Britain in the struggle which she has undertaken against the common enemy of mankind.